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ABSTRACT

A position paper addresses the current round of school closings in the District of Columbia arguing that these closings are not within the context of the 10-year educational facilities plan that included community input, and valid criteria for closing decisions being consistently and objectively applied. Current closings decisions are viewed as being made in a vacuum with little regard for the educational mission of the school system, the larger role of schools in communities, the management issues involved, or the families effected. It discusses why restraint must be exercised before closing a large number of facilities without a master plan, why in some cases the closing criteria is not supported by the demographic data, and why the building assessment process is a weak link in the system. It also addresses how school closings can affect the District community involved beyond the sentimental attachment, why schools targeted for closure be measured against educational as well as physical benchmarks, and the importance of linking modernization and closing that help assure relocated children and their parents that the new facility they are going to is safe and appropriate. (GR)

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ED 460 586

Re: Position paper on school closings

Excess building space is one of the important issues facing the school system. The 21st Century School Fund has contributed to the quantification as well as the qualification of space planning issues in our system. Our position is that school closings and consolidations should happen within the context of a ten-year educational facilities master plan which must be developed with meaningful community input; and that closings should be based on valid criteria, consistently and objectively applied. This is not the context under which the current school closings have been sent forward. In fact, the current school closing proposal lacks firm underpinnings in several areas:

- The scope of the closing list and the immediacy of the closings shows a disregard for the real needs of the system.
- The published criteria do not appear to align with the schools selected for closings;
- The application of available facility assessment data is inappropriate in many cases, and contains significant errors in others;
- The Draft Educational Facility Master Plan released by the DCPS in February 1997 does not lay any groundwork upon which to build a framework for school closings;
- Community involvement has been relegated to after-the-fact desperate reactions of families to the threatened closings of cherished community institutions;
- No understanding of educational programming was brought to bear in the selection process.
- Linkage between school closings and modernizations is absent in most cases and of questionable financial basis in others.
- New development of housing which will impact the need for school space in specific neighbhorhoods has not been evaluated.

In short, the current round of closings appears to have been developed in a vacuum with little respect for the educational mission of the school system, the larger role of schools in communities, the management issues involved or the families affected by the effort.

1. **Closing scope and timetable:**
Congress has mandated that the school system close six schools. The school system has released a plan calling for the closure of sixteen schools. While the existence of excess capacity is not at issue, the administration's rush to close a larger number of facilities without a master plan is troubling. Restraint is warranted for the following reasons:

   A. **The school system has not articulated its vision for the future.** If we do not understand what we are trying to achieve educationally, then we do not know what sort of building inventory is needed to support our programs physically. Therefore any hastily-completed closings may deleteriously limit desirable options for future. Until the school system has developed standard educational specifications and looked into the feasibility of bringing the existing building stock up to compliance with the standard, the real costs of keeping any particular school remain unknown.

   B. **A slower contraction of the system's size could become a positive aspect of the master plan by moving students into modernized space**, thereby protecting them from the hazards of living in construction sites and providing them with more

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appropriate facilities. Under the current proposal, no students are slated to go directly from their current school into modernized space. Where the current plan links closings and modernizations, the benefits are based on questionable financial scenarios and future capital projects, in most cases, are targeted for schools unaffected by consolidation.

C. **A phased-in plan would also provide opportunity to develop community-based solutions for consolidation**, thereby improving the planning process and resulting plans by infusing them with authentic knowledge of educational programs and neighborhoods, and reducing the anguish and distrust felt in local communities. While there is no way to make everyone happy about school closings, we have found a genuine understanding in many local school communities of the issues facing the school system and a willingness to close facilities in cases where it provides a real benefit to the children affected.

D. **A well-considered consolidation plan that is framed within a ten-year educational facilities master plan would better argue for sustained capital funding from Congress and the Council.** If the closings are directly and consequentially linked to modernizations, and if the real estate plan and other aspects of the facilities management program increase confidence of the stakeholders, the District's families and school system together can argue for a fully-funded multi-year modernization program. We have seen too many quick starts and miracle cures to believe in anything other than a serious and long-term commitment to real improvement. It may not be as dramatic as the quick fix, but it will serve the students and taxpayers better in both the long- and short- term.

E. **Phasing-in closings would allow for a learning curve** as the administration and trustees become familiar with issues of education policy and school facilities management, as well as with the particular educational programs and buildings in the DCPS system. The current proposal exhibits an incomplete understanding of primary issues in school planning such as the implications of demographics, optimal school size, and current research in school design. It would also allow for a more complete synthesis of the data that has been collected over the last five years. The fact that the new administration found itself short of time on the task is a good reason to proceed with caution.

2. **Closing criteria**

We have maintained that the closing criteria adopted by the school system is ambiguous, non-measurable, and narrow. Further, the buildings on the closing list do not match the closing criteria much more than any randomly selected group of schools would have. The targeted schools do, however, appear to be smaller buildings, even if fully utilized. The distribution of the targeted schools is not supported by the demographic data in some cases.

A. **Some issues that were not addressed in the DCPS criteria include:**

- Size of school site and suitability for supporting educational programs;

- Projected demographic trends in subject neighborhood, including housing starts;
- Type of educational programs desired for the school system, projected ten years ahead;
- Minimum, optimal, and maximum enrollment sizes for various types of schools;
- School performance (as a means of both identifying strong programs to replicate, protect, and possibly expand, as well as weak programs to reform). Some schools are under enrolled not because the demographics don't support a school at a particular site, but rather because of disinvestment in the school's educational program and subsequent abandonment by the local community. Such schools may be good candidates for continued operation, but will require reform of the educational program in order to attract students back to the school.

B. **Other issues that *were* included raise questions as to their intended use.** For example, out-of-boundary enrollment is included as a criterion, but it is unclear whether this is seen as a positive or negative factor. High out-of-boundary enrollment is usually a sign of a successful program. Because the school system has been mismanaged for so long, it has been often on the shoulders of local communities, along with committed principals and teachers, to create good schools within the vacuum of the system. We recommend that the years of hard work involved in these efforts be recognized, supported, and extended to other sites rather than destroyed. In many cases, schools with high out-of-boundary enrollment are the most racially and economically integrated.

C. **Another criteria that seems out of place is building age.** Since building condition is a separate criterion, the issue of age seems misplaced. We have found that school buildings of each era contain assets and liabilities based on how well the education and design thinking of the time translates into current usage. For example, the school buildings constructed between 1900 and 1930 often contain the best finish materials. These materials have stood the test of time and are still fully functioning. On the down side, these buildings were built without many of the support spaces considered important today. In contrast, the buildings of the 1970s incorporate ample support space, but the open-plan philosophy guiding their design is no longer desirable due to educational, health and security concerns. Further, the 1970s mechanical systems were designed in response to the energy crisis, but their low ventilation rates, lack of maintenance, and subsequent poor indoor air quality adds greatly to the cost of proper modernization and operation of this systems. These costs are not reflected in the data because the quality of the learning environment was not within the scope of study in either the 3DI or DMJM engineering reports.

Building condition does not correlate decisively with age, if the desired outcome condition is a modernized facility. The issues around age can be better attended to through a detailed analysis of building condition.

D. **The targeted schools appear to be smaller buildings, even if fully utilized.** Receiving schools, on the other hand, in many cases are large buildings that are designed for higher enrollments than that recommended by the current research in education. In some cases, the receiving schools don't contain sufficient space for the transferring students.

E. **In other cases, coherent educational programs appear to be slated for dismantling** as children from unique programs are to be dispersed to more than one receiving school, or at receiving schools which do not espouse the program philosophy. This is in marked contrast to statements made by Generals William and Becton at various public forums. Further, many of the receiving schools have their own facility issues that should be addressed before they are made to house additional students. These details are outlined in the DMJM reports and elsewhere.

3. **Assessing building condition**

The U. S. Congress and DC taxpayers have made a tremendous investment in the analysis of our school buildings. Keeping the information current and applying it to micro-scale decision-making has been and continues to be a weak link in the process. The DMJM updates to the 1991 facility assessment by 3DI, while adding some valuable information, appear to lack current information about school condition and contain redundancies and errors. Whether all errors are in the update or if some derive from the original study is not clear; it is clear, however, that the thought process would have benefited greatly from access to updated capital project lists and actual site visits to school closing candidates by licensed architects and engineers to synthesize the various reports and verify findings.

A. **Condition updates:**

Improvements made between 1991 and 1997 do not appear to have been incorporated into the DMJM reports, even though that information is available within DCPS. For example, a door replacement at Harrison Elementary School was completed two years ago; the DMJM report incorrectly lists the doors as still needing replacement.

B. **Questionable costs:**

The costs listed in the report appear to be quite high. For example, neighboring school systems pay half the quoted amount for roof replacements. Other costs also appear to be high. This makes schools look even more expensive to repair than they are. However, if these estimates are thought to accurately reflect the cost to produce the work and conduct business with DCPS, improved procurement and construction management practices needed to be instituted to better contain costs. Our limited capital dollars will not go very far on the remaining operating schools without some effort at containment and fiscal discipline.

C. **Redundancies:**

The DMJM reports that were used to assess costs of building improvements appear to call for duplicating capital work. For example, again at Harrison Elementary School, the capital cost estimate calls for renovating four toilet rooms. These same

toilet rooms are then listed for renovation a second time under the heading "ADA improvements". This amounts to a double counting of the renovation costs, because a bathroom renovation should handle both the plumbing upgrade and the ADA improvements in one act. This and similar errors drives up the apparent cost of fixing Harrison (and the other schools) and provides an inflated price tag for the overall capital program. It is a significant challenge without such inflated numbers.

4. **Vision and Master Plan**

The problems outlined above would be less likely to occur if the school system would approach facilities management from the point of view of its educational vision for the future. The fragmented approach applied to the developing the master plan, proposing school closings, and even evaluating the condition of individual buildings does not provide the most reasonable basis for decision making. We will not reach our target of having safe, educationally appropriate and efficiently operated school buildings in ten years if we cannot define what that condition looks like, and what it will take to get there.

5. **Community involvement**

It is natural for local communities to feel an attachment to their schools. The depth of feeling associated with closings in the District is stronger than a merely sentimental attachment to a building or site, but rather grows from several substantive concerns:

- Local communities do not trust the school system to act on behalf of children;
- Successful programs often survive *in spite of* and not because of the DCPS central administration;
- There is a fear that the system wishes to consolidate children into large ware-house-type school buildings, regardless of the learning environment;
- Communities were not asked to participate in the master plan or in the closing process;
- The communities often have to do the work of the administration in facilities management and other areas. For example, targeted communities are finding themselves undertaking the kind of research and analysis that the administration should have completed before presenting a list of schools to close.

A more positive approach to community involvement would be to engage the community in the creation of a vision for the school system, and in developing the strategic plan to achieve the vision. Closings are one facet of the plan. Under this approach, the community of parents, students, taxpayers and others could be empowered stakeholders rather than passive (or angry) recipients of top-down actions. This is the way school planning works in jurisdictions with successful long-range school improvement initiatives, whether under appointed or elected boards of education.

6. **Educational planning:**

Schools targeted for closure should be measured against educational as well as physical benchmarks.

For example, research tells us that the optimal size for elementary schools is between 300 and 600 students. Schools smaller than 300 can be quite successful educationally, but lack may economies of scale to support diverse offerings. Programs larger than 600 students tend to lose their ability to nurture students as individual learners. Small schools have often been more successful in the District because local communities have been able to foster a greater sense of ownership and accountability within a smaller unit. Most of the schools slated for closing are elementary schools in the 300-600 size range. Many would be consolidated into programs at or above the 600 student level. The anticipated economies of larger schools are worthless if the children in them don't succeed educationally. In fact, the larger buildings of the 1970s building era have never achieved their advertised economies because, in part, they have not served the communities adequately educationally or environmentally.

The large schools of the 1970s era should be studied, as recommended in the *Interim Report*, to assess the feasibility and cost of converting them into more appropriate learning environments before more students are consolidated into them. The scope of work associated with modernizing the schools of this era should be studied in detail, using a standard educational specification as a benchmark. Security, defensible space, indoor air quality, daylighting, student well-being, acoustics, and related issues should be considered.

It is imperative that the system develop prototypical educational specifications for the various types of programs desired in order to have a basis for evaluating existing facilities. These educational specifications should be developed with input from a broad range of experts and end-users, and should incorporate an explicit degree of customization or variation when applied to specific projects.

7. **Linkage between modernizations and closings:**
All substantive actions relating to school facilities should be knitted together in the educational facilities master plan. Even so, a more direct linkage between closure and modernization is desirable for children who are to be moved out of their schools. We can be sure that all schools merit modernization, because all have been neglected; but children who are being displaced are especially vulnerable. They and their families deserve to know that they are relocating to safe and appropriate facilities.

A. **Most children are moving into space that is just as likely to be closed for fire code violations or otherwise in poor condition as the schools they are leaving.** In a few cases, the school system has offered a modernization (or replacement) project for schools to receive displaced children (Taft to Backus, Stevens, Evans to Miller). None, however, will be modernized by September, when the targeted schools will close. The sequence of projects is unclear. When will Taft and Douglass be partially modernized? What is the scope of the partial modernization projects?

B. **We are concerned that the promised modernizations are based on real estate estimates which appear to be inflated.** The estimate of $21,000,000 for the Stevens project is based on an assumption of $100 per square, although $45to $65 per square foot is considered much more realistic, according to numberous real estate

consultants familiar with downtown office development. Further, the cost of the school portion of the project would have to be subtracted from the projected income. Because of the sequence of projects, this real estate approach pushes the promised modernizations farther out into the future. (We can't tell how far, because these do not appear in the master plan). The students and their families have to give everything up and wait and hope that the real estate market goes up even as the system unloads a large number of properties simultaneously.

In summary, while we recognize the importance of reducing the school building inventory, we cannot support the currently proposed closings. Restraint may not play as well for congress or the control board, but a reasoned, fair policy of planned reduction in inventory, accomplished with vision and community involvement will gain the District's public school students and their families, as well as its taxpayers, a more efficient, safe, and educationally appropriate set of school buildings.